



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The West End finally joins Alexandria

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Image: The West End, 1863. Courtesy, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Many years before the original West End neighborhood developed in the early 19th century, the area was always a crossroads area that connected agricultural and more urban centers to the west with the Potomac River to the east.

It is believed that the Little River Turnpike, which still enters Alexandria from the west, was upgraded from an ancient Native American trail that linked camps used for foraging, hunting and



gathering with the large riverine environment that provided fish and other sources of subsistence, as well as a common means of travel and defense. The open fields interspersed with dense woodlands along the trail were a perfect environment for harvesting the “Three Sisters” of the Native American diet: maize, beans and squash.

After European settlement began in the Virginia colony, it is believed that as early as the late 1600s, tenant farmers had started to clear the thick forests along what later became Duke Street for use as small farm plots. These were later assembled by Tidewater planters for larger agricultural operations in a land boom which lasted from 1720 until 1732, the year Hugh West established the first tobacco inspection station in Northern Virginia at the foot of Oronoco Street.

By the mid-18th century, the area at the base of Shuter’s Hill, north of Great Hunting Creek and west of Hooff’s Run, was located at the mid-point between the settlement of Cameron and the new town of Alexandria, which had both competed to become the main port of the region.

When the town of Alexandria was ceded by the Commonwealth of Virginia to become part of the District of Columbia in the late 1700s, the area again sat at a crossroads, with the neighborhood sliced in half by the new boundary of the nation’s capital. Soon after, the evolution of the area into a trading network resulted in the sale of plantation lands for more intense uses.

The West End moniker was unofficially established by the early 1800s, and historians still debate whether it was based on the early landholdings of surveyor John West, or on its proximity to the town of Alexandria, several blocks to the east. At the time, West End buildings within a two-block radius of each other found themselves within the differing jurisdictions of that town, Fairfax County, and the District of Columbia.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Even then, the location of the never incorporated West End community was at the edges of each governmental authority, and less than reputable activities were tolerated in the slow-growing neighborhood by officials focused on more pressing issues within the core of each locality.

By the 1840s, new rail lines were built immediately south of Duke Street to Alexandria, allowing the West End to develop more prominently into a secondary transportation hub and build on its evolving industrial and commercial base. Cattle yards, butcheries, a tannery and a soap factory sprang up near the railroad and attracted temporary laborers to the community who also worked the backyards of Duke Street homes and businesses as small farm plots.

During the Civil War, as seen in this 1863 image, the area continued to grow, but once the war ended in 1865 the economy stalled for decades. In 1915, the area was finally annexed by Alexandria and the construction of townhomes quickly spread across the community, wiping out most vestiges of the former crossroads village.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.